

DO SPORTS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS MAKE A WINNING COMBINATION FOR  
SCHOOLS? – HOW PUBLIC RELATIONS IS UTILIZED IN THE OLE MISS  
ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT AND THAT OF FOUR OTHER UNIVERSITIES

by  
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## ABSTRACT

LAUREN MCMILLIN: Do Sports and Public Relations Make a Winning Combination for Schools? – How public relations is utilized in the Ole Miss Athletics Department and that of four other universities

This thesis covers several areas of investigation. A majority of the information came from staff members in the Ole Miss Athletics Department and the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, including information from my own experiences working with both organizations. In researching other schools, I reached out to colleagues associated with the four other universities that I examined, interviewing them on different subject matters. Additional information was found in textbooks and online articles.

From my research, I was able to discover the various methods that schools use to promote athletics programs. By employing the areas of public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions and fundraising, schools can communicate efficiently and effectively with their target publics; furthermore, administrators in athletics departments can utilize these skills when facing crises, knowing how to properly communicate with publics and handle situations. Tailoring each of these areas to a school's specific needs, including its target publics along with the needs of the university and student-athletes, can help staff members of athletics departments promote their programs in a positive, impactful manner.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 1: FUNDAMENTALS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN ATHLETICS.....	19
CHAPTER 2: OLE MISS ATHLETICS' APPROACH TO PUBLIC RELATIONS.....	28
CHAPTER 3: OTHER SCHOOLS' APPROACHES TO ATHLETICS AND PROMOTIONS.....	49
CHAPTER 4: HANDLING CRISES.....	68
CHAPTER 5: THE FUTURE OF OLE MISS ATHLETICS.....	81
CONCLUSION.....	87
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	90

## **Introduction**

Does a winning touchdown make for a winning college? In many cases, yes. In today's world of higher education, athletics are an integral part of each university. When describing higher education today, athletics and academics are words that are, essentially, interchangeable. Much of the influence of how well a university is known or perceived comes from not only how its students excel in the classroom, but also how its student-athletes perform on the field. In addition, schools generate a considerable amount of revenue from sports, allowing them to increase their statuses as institutions and continue to expand as communities. A core component in ensuring this monetary support is through the development of external relations, building relationships with a variety of publics. These publics range anywhere from students, prospective students, alumni, academic communities and sports fans, each playing a key role in its respective area of support. Because the public perception of a university is often based mainly on a person's knowledge and perception of the school's sports teams, it is important that the public relations, communications and marketing staffs for the sports department practice effective and consistent public relations and marketing techniques. This paper examines how Ole Miss athletics administrators and those from selected other colleges across the country utilize sports marketing and communication methods and how those methods intertwine with and influence the perception and reputation of the universities' athletics programs as a whole, developing both community and external relations.

For example, "At the University of Florida, the school culture and athletics are interconnected in a way that one cannot truly function without the

other,” said Jimena Panduro, a recent graduate of the University of Florida and an intern in its athletics department. “When I say this I mean that one’s success determines the other’s attitude. Back in 2006 and 2009, our basketball and football program was at the top of its game. We were winning national championships left and right, and campus and the university was a happy place to be around. Saturdays at the Swamp (the school’s football stadium) meant that the place would be packed and the campus in general boosting with energy, passion, and happiness.”

One of the sports information directors Panduro works closely with is Robyn Jones, the primary contact for men’s golf and the secondary contact for men’s basketball at the University of Florida. “Florida’s culture revolves around athletics,” Jones said. “Although it is a major academic program, the students, fans, professors and staff alike all dedicate their love to Gator sports.”

While Panduro and Jones have been able to see the up-side of a successful athletic department, they have also experienced the negatives that come with losing seasons..

“Fast-forward to this 2013 season and you wouldn’t even think this is the same university,” Panduro said. “People are angry, depressed and, more than anything, disappointed with the school. Our football team is 4-7 and will finish with a losing record regardless of the outcome in the last game, and people are saying that it is ‘an embarrassment to attend the University of Florida.’ Notice how they use University of Florida. That’s how the culture in Gainesville is. If you are a student here, then athletics comes with it. And when one fails, the university and student body fails. We all fail.

“I’ve been here through the highs and lows of Florida football. I never truly understood what a school culture was or how connected it could possibly be. This season has taught me just how dependent they are on each other. Back in 2008, campus was a terrific atmosphere. Right now, it’s a big angry mess.”

The decisive factor that athletics has on fans’ satisfaction and enthusiasm holds true for the University of Mississippi as well. When asked how closely fans are related to Ole Miss athletics, Kyle Campbell, assistant athletics director for media and public relations, said:

“I think very much so. Football has such a huge fan following, and our success certainly has a large effect on how they live their lives. For a lot of our fans, their happiness is predicated on the success of Ole Miss football. Because of the crowds that we bring to campus, because of the massive amount of media coverage around our teams and because there are no professional sports in our area and the state, so much of our fans’ interest, as it pertains to sports in this state and as it pertains to the University, revolves around our athletics teams.”

Among the various sports at universities across the country, the major spectator sports generate the most financial support. This generally includes football, basketball and baseball. The teams for these sports are the ones most often covered by major television and news networks, obtaining the most publicity. When these teams start competing for regional and national titles, their statuses soar, gaining an increased number of viewers and a larger stage on which to perform. The publics associated with these schools become progressively prouder with the advancements of their teams. Success encourages the fans to make donations and become an integral part of their



school's athletic success. By marketing and promoting the accomplishments of various spectator sports, schools have the opportunity to further expand their level of supporters not only on a local level, but on a national level as well. According to J. Douglas Toma, in his text *Football U.: Spectator Sports in the Life of the American University*, "Effective external relations is what enables the aspirations of essentially local institutions to national standing" (1). The money that schools raise in support of their student-athletes goes mostly toward establishing athletic programs, securing personnel to help them reach higher levels of success, and develop facilities to help place them among the highest-ranked institutions in the country. Toma continues by adding,

"Through the external relations functions, American institutions exploit the tendency of people to want to associate themselves with such esteemed places, translating identification with institutions into tangible support for them.

Institutional identification is thus the key to effective external relations that enable institutions not only to sustain themselves, but to build" (12).

When questioning what makes spectator sports such an important part of a school's reputation and standing, it is important to first examine the experiences that they provide and the connections they allow people to have to schools. "Spectator sports are not merely an activity, but a phenomenon with an important place in both institutional culture and the broader American culture" (Toma 7). Football is a prime example of how spectator sports help form cultures at schools, whether through its history or the traditions that have formed over the years. At major colleges and universities,

"Spectator sports provide a prominent and powerful forum for the expression of what is distinctive about the institution. In and around the stadium

on football Saturdays, the university community displays its culture in tangible and unique forms – its colors, logos and mascots (symbols); songs and slogans (language); stories, legends, and myths (narratives); and rituals and ceremonials (practices)” (Toma 9).

The University of Mississippi serves an excellent example for this image. With its rich history and ongoing traditions, this school demonstrates how vital the role of athletics is to its overall success and the role that it plays in building a community.

The establishment of a community is one of the elements that comes along with spectator sports. “Although not everyone takes part, spectator sports provide the broadest opportunity for extended communities to share in a complex cultural experience that embodies the collegiate look and feel that people expect of even the largest institutions” (Toma 9). Events at Ole Miss, as the University of Mississippi is affectionately known, clearly illustrate this notion. Game days are ultimately an experience, with the football game serving as the centerpiece. Surrounding the game itself is an array of festivity, generally taking place in the school’s Grove, what *The Bleacher Report* refers to as a “10-acre plot of heaven” which Ole Miss fans transform “into a virtual tent city before every home game” (Anderson). Anderson goes on to quote an article from *The New York Times*, describing the nature of the Grove and the role that it plays on Ole Miss game days.

““Ole Miss’s stadium accommodates 60,580 people, and devotees of the Grove argue that the Grove accommodates more. It is every kind of party you can describe, at once: cocktail party, dinner party, tailgate picnic party, fraternity and sorority rush, family reunion, political handgrab, gala and networking party-

hearty – what might have inspired Willie Morris, one of Mississippi’s favorite sons, to declare Mississippi not a state, but a club.””

Generations of Ole Miss fans fill the Grove from one edge to the other, even spilling into the streets of the University and on toward the stadium. While most fans will move to the stadium within a few hours before kickoff, a large number of those in the Grove choose to stay, whether by choice or because they did not purchase a ticket. Even for those who do not attend the games, though, all have the opportunity to see the Ole Miss Rebels football team as they journey toward the stadium. This is done through a tradition known as the “Walk of Champions,” which occurs two hours before every home game.

“In front of thousands of exuberant fans and a boisterous ‘Are You Ready?’ proclamation from the crowd, the Rebels make their way through the Grove. Coaches and players throw high fives to fans young and old, as the team eventually makes its way to Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. For Ole Miss fans, it’s one tradition that simply never gets old” (Anderson).

Traditions such as these can be found at schools across the country. Observing and participating in these practices causes fans and spectators to become attached to the institutions. This level of attachment varies, ranging from a mild appreciation to a passion for the school and its programs. It is from this passion that the targeted external groups for donations emerge. Ultimately, this includes major donors and annual fund contributors, legislative appropriation committees and taxpaying citizens, and prospective students and tuition-paying parents (Toma 11).

Toma sums up the relationship between spectators' interest in a school's athletic programs and the desire to become contributors:

“Such passion and familiarity provide an opening for universities in all their advancement activities – an opportunity those responsible for alumni relations, development, government relations, community relations, and even student recruitment use to full advantage. Effective external relations are essentially a process of involving people in the lives of universities by underscoring what is collegiate and important about them: thus the utility and the centrality of spectator sports” (12).

Among the three main spectator sports of football, basketball and baseball, football stands out as the most popular. Why do people associated with major athletic schools tend to favor football programs over academic programs? According to Toma, football is interesting and academics are not. Although this is put simply, this concept goes beyond the surface. Since most of a school's athletic supporters are not students, they are more familiar with their school's football program and are more likely to closely follow its progress. Football is what these fans care about, generally more so than the academic achievements of their school's students or faculty. This is also partly because football is the part of the institution that is most visible and most accessible. While academics may occasionally gain national attention, football is ultimately what makes schools known nationally (Toma 9).

While it may be easier said than done, having a place in the national spotlight becomes a strong desire for school officials and their athletic programs. This is an

achievement that can help them build significance, create a powerful image and make a name for themselves beyond the local communities in which they reside.

“Developing and maintaining a brand name nationally is important for institutions, as it underscores the distinctiveness and noteworthiness that encourages pride and passion among the immediate university community of faculty, administrators, and students, as well as in the extended community of key local supporters” (Toma 11).

Presenting the school’s community with this idea is a core concept in encouraging support:

“Spectator sports matter in how these institutions operate in both a strategic and daily sense to the point that it is impossible to describe, or even envision, them without spectator sports. Spectator sports assume meanings that transcend the event on game day – and even the core missions of the institution itself. Teams and games come to represent the university – both literally and figuratively – for many Americans” (Toma 14).

It is from this standpoint that schools reach out to their external audiences, urging them to be a part of an institution that is nationally acclaimed, acquiring attention from across the nation and winning championships. With this mindset, schools develop strategies to draw in the support of their publics, making their athletic programs a vital piece to the overall success of the school.

Finding ways to attract people and encourage support begins from first determining which publics form an institution’s target audiences. These can be categorized in a term that Lynn R. Kahle and Chris Riley in their text *Sports Marketing*

*and the Psychology of Marketing Communication*, refer to as “consumption communities.” People who fall under the genre of consumption communities generally include those who engage in sports, those who participate in sports and those who participate in nature-related sports (Kahle 1). In addition to these participants, this group includes spectators, viewers and readers. When considering collegiate athletics, the target audience refers to the fans and the student-athletes along with prospective student-athletes. As far as major spectator sports at colleges and universities, nature-related sports generally do not apply.

With the other target audiences in mind, however, there are a variety of ways in which institutions capture and retain the public attention. Schools have shown, time and time again, that people gravitate toward teams that are consistently successful, winning championships and making those associated with them proud to be so. While the success of sports teams by the teams’ winning or losing records plays a large part in determining support, schools use other approaches to help with the institution’s overall success. This includes celebrity endorsements, particularly through famous athletes that either currently participate on a team or have had a past connection or presence with the school.

Sports celebrity appearances are, for the most part, seen through television promotions, printed ads, charity functions and product endorsements. To avoid the risk of violating NCAA regulations and being paid, current collegiate athletes are not usually found in product endorsements. They do, however, appear in promotions for the school, whether in advertisements or in videos for game day promotions. Fans tend to follow and support the star athletes, and identifying them in such promotions captures audiences’ attention. With repeated exposure, fans become more familiar with the faces of student-

athletes, making them feel more connected with them while they are performing on the field or on the court.

Kahle and Riley provide insight into the psychological impact that sports celebrities have on certain audiences:

“Sports produce celebrities. People often want to associate themselves with these star athletes and celebrities. After all, most sports stars apparently achieve their success through remarkable skill and intense effort. Sports stars often embody many of the personal attributes society admires. Marketers have tapped into this phenomenon by using sports celebrities to endorse products of many different forms, from shoes for sports to unseen underwear” (105).

Among these “attributes” that society admires, athletes, particular the successful ones, tend to convey winning attitudes, healthy appearances and general appeal (105). Student-athletes with these qualities become magnets for fans, and the more fans are exposed to them, the more closely they desire to identify with them. This connection carries over into fans becoming supporters of the school for which the athlete plays, increasing the factors they might have in common with these student-athletes.

However, there are dangers in having young men and women athletes bear the responsibility of the school’s image because like any young person, they may make mistakes or behave badly. While schools depend partly on the images of their teams and the athletes that play on them, they have to carefully monitor the behaviors of these athletes, trusting coaching staffs to make sure their athletes represent the school in a positive light; however, “public perception of athletes can change, sometimes rather rapidly” (109). When athletes put themselves in situations dangerous to both their

reputations and their athletic careers, such as running in with the law or struggling academically, fans tend to develop negative thoughts about them, damaging their overall feelings toward the teams and school's athletic programs.

When selecting which student-athletes to use in advertisements and at events to garner attention and support, schools must consider which athletes will best represent their programs and assist in the school's promotions. Among the qualities that should be examined, schools should think about diversity (whether in terms of gender or race), frequency (meaning the amount of playing time the athletes have and how much they are already seen by the public eye), sport prevalence (referring to whether they play on a major spectator sports team and how impactful they are toward it), strategy (in terms of how they can best reach outside audiences), and congruency (in terms of gender and the use of the promotion in their respective sport) (109). With these concepts in mind, schools and their athletic departments can work well with their student-athletes, using them not simply to promote a sport, but to give them the opportunity to connect with fans and audiences and play a part in the development of their school's overall athletic success. An example of this would be the promotional videos that the Ole Miss Athletics Department plays at games or posts on social media sites. The producers select specific student-athletes to appear in the videos based not only on their prominence on their respective team but also how well they represent both themselves and the University.

A key component in marketing and promotion is the establishment and development of a brand. According to Toma, the essence of a brand relates directly to a sense of identification with an institution, forming a connection between schools and



supporters and working to consistently tighten that grip. This is especially evident through major spectator sports that colleges and universities offer.

“Collegiate life in the form of spectator sports provides a means to represent what is distinctive and accessible about institutions to external constituents in forms that they can understand, thus tending to increase their identification with the institution. It is the most apparent part of the university to people who provide it with essential financial support. What people throughout the state are likely to know about [the university] – and about higher education in general – they are likely to know in relation to spectator sports. It is what they read about, hear about and talk about. In addition, spectator sports draw these people from off campus onto campus, either in person or through the media” (195).

How do all of these factors come into play at the University of Mississippi?

This sense of brand-building and the components that go along with it is demonstrated clearly through the marketing and media relations areas of the Ole Miss Athletics Department. Michael Thompson, senior associate athletics director for communications and marketing, and Campbell, assistant athletics director for media and public relations, work daily to put the Ole Miss brand in the best possible light.

In the text *Sport Marketing*, Bernard James Mullin, Stephen Hardy and William Anthony Sutton examine the definition of public relations. They begin by looking at a definition developed by the *Public Relations News*:

“Public Relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization

with the public interest and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.’

According to a more corporate definition, offered by Clarke L. Caywood, public relations is ‘the profitable integration of an organization’s new and continuing relationship with stakeholders including customers by managing all communications contacts with the organization that create and protect the reputation of the organization.’ Finally, Govoni, Eng and Gapler emphasize the relationship between the sender in the audience in terms of the credibility of the message and cloaks the company with the respectability of the source, which may be viewed by the audience as either the spokesperson or the medium” (317).

Through marketing strategies such as fan promotions and presenting the community with positive messages, Thompson and Campbell along with the rest of the Ole Miss Athletics Department strive for strong external relations, building the Ole Miss fan base as much as they are able.

In the same way that fans recognize and connect with the Ole Miss brand, they also tend to find a sense of identification with it. This is a major factor when it comes to obtaining more than moral support from fans. While Ole Miss brings in money from sources such as television appearances, its conference affiliation and merchandising, in order to function properly, Ole Miss athletics needs a sound financial source. This is where the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation comes into play. As the backbone for Ole Miss athletics, the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation employs this concept of identification, allowing fans and supporters the opportunity to connect with student-athletes and their respective teams, primarily in the form of financial gifts. With ongoing support,

however, fans experience more than giving donations; rather, the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation rewards the efforts of its supporters, through initiatives such as priority seating at sporting events, school apparel and access to exclusive events. As teams begin to see success, these close supporters begin to feel a part of that success, providing the student-athletes with the resources and facilities that they need to achieve greatness and, ultimately, win championships.

These methods of marketing and reaching out to supporters of athletics programs are not limited to The University of Mississippi; rather, schools across the country follow similar approaches. To understand this concept more fully, there will be a chapter dedicated to exploring ways in which other schools garner support for their athletics, especially between schools that vary greatly from one another. By looking at Vanderbilt University, the University of Michigan, the University of Louisville and the University of Florida, one can achieve a stronger and clearer understanding of how schools and their athletic departments function and expand.

A concept that all schools must be prepared to face is the issue of handling crises, particularly within their athletic departments. While not all schools have experienced such problems that have called for a crisis response, there have been quite a few that have, and the ways in which they approach and deal with the crises reveal, in many ways, the character of the school. The University of Mississippi has dealt with a series of minor crises, ranging from issues about coaches and players to conflicts with fans, but there are several schools that have experienced dangerous crises, ones that pose major threats to the schools, especially their athletic programs. To give a brief insight into this, I will examine the crisis situations at Ole Miss along with various insights on other schools.

Understanding the elements that go into a successful athletics department can appear to be a broad and difficult task. Determining different levels of external audiences, establishing strong connections with those audiences and, ultimately, convincing them to donate and support a university's athletic ambitions requires carefully planned, detail-oriented processes.

Marketing athletics departments and its various components is a key tactic to reaching external publics and building fan bases. Joy T. Desensi and Danny Rosenberg, in their text *Sport Management Library: Ethics in Sport Management*, explain the concept of marketing, particularly in terms of athletics:

“Today’s marketers clearly need a rational, coherent system that can match sport consumers with sport products. We may call this sport marketing – but what is sport marketing? Unfortunately, the concept is still quite loose. The term ‘sports marketing’ was coined by Advertising Age in 1978 to describe the activities of consumer and industrial product and service marketers who were increasingly using sport as a promotional vehicle” (8).

Elaborating on the fundamentals of sport marketing, Desensi and Rosenberg add,

“Sport marketing consists of all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sport consumers through exchange processes. Sport marketing has developed two major thrusts: the marketing of sport products and services directly to consumers of sport, and marketing of other consumer and industrial products or services through the use of sport promotions” (9).

Catering to external publics using these fundamental strategies, whether in the form of students, student-athletes, fans, alumni, and other outside communities, varies with each public. Each public plays a certain role in the overall success of a school's athletic programs, and it is largely up to the schools and their athletic departments to bring about that success. Investing in marketing strategies such as public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions and fundraising are all ways in which schools approach this concept; furthermore, the establishment of a brand, and building upon that brand, allows fans and supporters to identify with the schools and their athletics, drawing them in closer and further encouraging them to provide support. While schools may occasionally have to deal with athletic-related crises, their methods of communication to handle them and how they compose themselves as an institution ultimately determine how their publics react. If handled properly, schools can retain the support of their publics, allowing them to move forward in their desired directions. By discovering and understanding which methods work the most appropriately for different programs, schools can experience growth and improvement in their athletics departments. Building fan bases can allow athletics departments to reach their goals as an institution, empowering the name of the schools and winning the championships that they all desire.

## Chapter 1: Fundamentals of Public Relations in Athletics

In each field of business, there is a need to approach public relations in a particular way, marketing and catering to an organization's target audiences. The sport industry is no exception. Finding the proper strategies and tactics to follow is a fundamental concept when trying to grab publics' attention and build fan bases. In their text, *Sport Marketing*, Bernard James Mullin, Stephen Hardy and William Anthony Sutton explain the qualities that make sport marketing unique from the styles of other industries. Discussing the strategies of successful brand names such as Nike and the NBA, they explain,

“Their success came from carefully developed visions and plans – game plans, to use a sport term. In fact, most successful organizations have taken key pages from the game plans of successful coaches who have always evaluated their own talent, carefully scouting their opponents, and developed their tactics and playbooks accordingly. In simple terms, that is the essence of strategy, and it's spread from the locker rooms to the front offices of the sport industry. In its simplest sense, strategy entails setting long-term goals and developing plans to achieve those goals. This requires a continual analysis of the environment and the organization. The challenges of today's marketplace have forced sport executives to think much more strategically” (17).

When determining which directions to take with promotions and which publics to target, athletics departments can employ a concept known as market segmentation. As Mullin, Hardy and Sutton explain,

“Market segmentation is a key concept [...] because it creates the bridge between managerial analysis and managerial action. It provides a conceptual framework upon which a sport marketer builds promotional strategies. In simple terms, market segmentation is the process of dividing a large, heterogeneous market into more homogenous groups of people, who have similar wants, needs or demographic profiles, to whom a product may be targeted” (60).

As far as athletics departments are concerned, this generally involves identifying fans and potential donors.

Among the common core strategies that officials at collegiate athletics departments use, some of the most common deal with public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions, and fundraising. A closer look at each of these key areas provides insight into how athletics departments function, building their fan bases and acquiring financial support.

### **Public and Media Relations**

Vital to building fan bases and developing strong external relations is the ability to have a sound and effective approach to public and media relations. According to Mullin, Hardy and Sutton,

“[t]he power of positive public relations to amplify a good marketing communications plan should never be underestimated. [...] [t]he media and public opinion continue to dominate how we perceive the world around us. [...] Thus, it has become critical in the sport setting to have effective public relations efforts and personnel that can function in times of crisis; it is crucial as well to promote

local initiatives and positive actions occurring as a result of day-to-day operational activities and strategic planning” (316).

A large portion of ensuring positive public and media relations appears in the form of communication. Consistently communicating with both the public and the media can help the staff members of an athletics department present the organization and its various components, including teams and individual student-athletes, in a positive light. Mullin, Hardy and Sutton continue, defining public relations as it relates to sports marketing:

“For the purpose of sport marketing, we will define public relations as an interactive marketing communications strategy that seeks to create a variety of mediums designed to convey the organizational philosophies, goals, and objectives to an identified group of publics for the purpose of establishing a relationship built upon comprehension, interest, and support. This communication strategy [...] may also involve players, media personnel, staff, mascots and other product extensions, sponsors, and other key components of the organization” (317).

Presenting the public with information through forms of publicity such as news stories, articles, interviews, and other activities is a controllable way to monitor the message that the public receives about an organization. The content that the media publishes, however, is not controllable, leaving room for both good and bad publicity (318).

“Media relations (MR) is just one half of the public relations function. [...] But in the long term, community relations (CR) can often be more or at least



equally significant in impacting sales, generating positive public sentiment, and building a long-term relationship (and base) with the community. [...] In short, public relations (PR) can be expressed in the form of an equation,  $PR = MR + CR$ ” (Mullin 318).

## **Marketing**

Similar to public and media relations, marketing is a critical component when it comes to connecting with the public, especially in the sports industry. In his book, *Sports Marketing: Competitive Business Strategies for Sport*, Chris Brooks explains that the item that staff members in athletics departments work to market is the sport product, which contains both tangible and intangible dimensions (87). He writes:

“[W]e define a sport as any form of physical activity that pits one’s talents against an opponent’s. [...] As a product, a sport is no different from [a] car or, for that matter, and consumer product. It has both tangible and intangible features. The final sports product itself is a composite of these interrelated tangible and intangible elements.

### **The Tangible Elements**

There are four tangible elements in the core sports product. They include

- The sports type – football, basketball, gymnastics
- The participants (athletes, coaches, and environment) – beginning or advanced players and coaches, challenging golf courses, difficult mountains

- The team – Notre Dame, Michigan, Dallas Cowboys, Australian Olympic Team
- The competition – The Bear (golf course), friends, rivals, world class, NCAA championships, the Super Bowl, local and regional championships

#### The Intangible Elements

The intangible dimension covers the psychic side of sports such as emotions and experiences and is an internally generated component.

These psychic elements embrace things such as

- The *high* we get from running our best marathon
- The *thrill* of winning our age group in the local 10k run
- The *satisfaction* of overcoming the challenge of a difficult golf course
- The *pride* we feel when our team wins” (88).

By keeping both the tangible and intangible elements of sports in mind, athletics departments and their staff members can work to develop marketing strategies that appeal to their target audiences. Combining ideas such as the experience of a particular game with the “thrill” and “pride” of seeing a team perform well is a way to capture the attention of communities and construct strong fan bases. Building this core foundation helps the staffs of athletics departments know how to market their respective teams and individual student-athletes, catering to each of their target publics according to their needs and desires.

## **Social Media**

A way of combining public and media relations into one entity is through the utilization of social media. This form of interactive communication allows staff members of athletics departments to directly connect with fans and communities, creating a two-way form of communication. In addition to reaching fans, social media provides staff members of athletics departments to communicate efficiently with members of the media.

“Interactive media relations involves developing mutually beneficial relationships with the media and assisting the media on a variety of issues. [...] In interactive media relations, either party can initiate the action or activity knowing that the other will cooperate fully because doing so is in the best interest of both” (Mullin 320).

Furthermore, social media outlets such as interactive web pages, blogs, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages can help athletics departments generate and collect feedback.

“Feedback is essential in the strategic planning process and critical to determining the acceptance and effectiveness of organizational policies and procedures. Public relations personnel play an integral role in monitoring the pulse of the public with regard to their interest in and acceptance and rejection of organizational products, concepts, and practices. Public relations people gather data on public attitudes, economic indicators, consumer preferences and behavior, and political and societal events in which the organization functions. Feedback may be generated by request (survey, poll, etc.) or simply as a result of past action

or inaction, without an official request (unsolicited and uninitiated letters, phone calls, etc.)” (Mullin 332).

## **Promotions**

Similar to the concept of marketing is that of promotions. According to Theodore Levitt’s “marketing myopia,” or “a lack of foresight in marketing ventures,” there tends to be confusion between promotions and marketing. “Promotion – including advertising and special events – is only part of a marketing mix or strategy” (Desensi 9-10).

Promotions are an effective way to reach target audiences and help people connect with organizations on a personal level. “These events are planned primarily to promote product sales, increase organizational visibility, or raise money for charitable causes” (Wilcox 323).

As far as athletics departments are concerned, promotions are put in place for any of the reasons mentioned above. Events to entertain and engage fans, exclusive societies and parties for donors, and deals on tickets and fan experiences are all examples of promotional strategies that athletics departments can implement. By incorporating basic public relations techniques of communication and striving to connect with publics, athletics departments can find success with promotions, obtaining financial support and building strong foundations for fan bases.

## **Fundraising**

Finding the proper finances to support an athletics organization is vital to obtaining success. Without the proper financial support, whether from the school or

outside communities, the efforts of athletics departments will be overlooked, if not forgotten (Steitz 38-39).

According to Edward S. Steitz, in the text *Administration of Athletics in Colleges and Universities*, athletic directors must be able to communicate with the public why they should fund athletics programs and how their monetary gifts will be used:

“‘Why’ the athletic programs and/or facilities are desirable must be answered on a philosophical as well as physical plane. The program must be justified in light of the beneficial effects on the institution as well as the student body. We are well aware of the great publicity value of athletic programs as well as the ‘school spirit’ they generate within the students. Publicity is of value in fund raising and recruiting efforts, while school spirit is an intangible that remains with an individual in his transition from student to alumnus, and we know of the importance of financial support from the alumni. Insofar as physical facilities are concerned, it is obvious that the need must be justified in light of increasing enrollment, dangerously old existing facilities, approval of new programs, etc.

‘How’ the athletic programs and facilities are to be financed is a question that perhaps should not be answered by the athletics director. Nevertheless, it is helpful to his cause if he has given thought and study to the problem and can offer suggestions that are sound, helpful, and convincing.

In this period of mounting educational costs, it has become more important to finance programs and facilities with the least possible strain on the annual budget of the institution. Gifts from corporations, foundations, individuals, alumni, and other sources are most desirable, while the net proceeds

from athletic events are a help and sometimes the sole support of athletics. Where this outside support is not substantial the institution must evaluate other areas of financing” (38-39).

## **Chapter 2: Ole Miss Athletics' Approach to Public Relations**

Ole Miss's marketing and communications efforts consist of the techniques mentioned in the previous chapter, including media relations, social media, marketing of games, promotions, fundraising and events catered to fans. Through the individual and combined efforts of the Ole Miss Athletics Department and the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, Ole Miss demonstrates the skills that it takes to conduct a successful athletics organization.

When considering the close relationship between the Ole Miss community and athletics, senior associate athletics director for communications and marketing Michael Thompson's answer was put simply: "They're (Ole Miss and athletics) one in the same." The Ole Miss Athletics Department coordinates all athletic activities and events, thus connecting with fans and communities with marketing, media relations, social media, promotions and, with the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, business relations. In this way, it is a crucial component to the external relations that the University forms. The Ole Miss Athletics Department has the responsibility for, ultimately, running the show, producing each and every athletic event, along with the communications and marketing strategies that go along with that.

Perhaps no public relations act better captures the essence of how athletics influences public perception of an institution than when University of Mississippi Chancellor Robert Khayat was so concerned about an image projected at athletic events that he consulted an Ole Miss alum who was named the most influential PR professional of the century.

Finding the right positive image, however, may be easier said than done. In the late 90s, the administrators of the University of Mississippi seriously examined the school's symbols and images, determining how the public viewed them. In his book, *The Education of a Lifetime*, former chancellor Robert Khayat discusses this issue and the challenges he and his staff faced while trying to find the best image for Ole Miss. Following the Civil War, the University of Mississippi adopted a series of images and symbols, the most prominent being the Confederate flag. With the help of Harold Burson, a fellow Ole Miss grad and a nationally respected PR professional who was named "PR Professional of the Century," Khayat and his staff sought to find which images were negatively impacting the Ole Miss brand and what measures needed to be taken to improve the public's perception.

Because of the tradition of having the Confederate flag as an Ole Miss symbol, not many people saw its negative side. Khayat writes:

"I think that many dedicated Ole Miss football fans from the 1940s to the 1990s had similarly naïve – if not innocent – attachments to the symbols. For many of us, the fact that the flag was being waved on behalf of extremist political positions didn't matter. Of course, (Mississippi) Governor Ross Barnett had embraced the darker side of the symbols during the integration crisis at Ole Miss, taking center stage at halftime of a football game to link the school's traditions with the importance of maintaining segregation. But for most of us, most of the time, those symbols had been more benign. That may seem naïve in retrospect, but those who embrace symbols don't always think about what they represent to others.



“On any given fall Saturday, the Ole Miss stadium was packed with tens of thousands of fans cheering on great athletes. The cheerleaders would throw bundles of colorful flags into the student section of the stadium, the smell of bourbon and cigar smoke wafted through the stands, the air was filled with music from the Ole Miss Band – the Pride of the South – and the crowd chanted the ‘Hotty Toddy’ cheer in unison” (163-164).

Despite the evident tradition of including the Confederate flag in Ole Miss football game days, Khayat and Burson felt that they needed to make a change. Burson and his team used the public relations strategy of conducting a survey, collecting and analyzing how people in the South viewed the University of Mississippi (Khayat 167). Khayat describes the disheartening results:

“The news about our image was depressing. The vast majority of the survey participants knew nothing about Ole Miss. It appeared that we had *no reputation* to speak of. But among those who did have an opinion about Ole Miss, they still perceived it as a ‘racist’ institution. And most of them associated the Confederate flag with the school. [...] The results were clear. Among our symbols, songs, mascots, and names, the Confederate flag was by far the most damaging to us” (167-168).

As a result, Khayat ultimately removed the Confederate flag from the collection of Ole Miss symbols, eliminating the flag prior to the 1998 football season. While many fans felt negatively toward this decision, Khayat and Burson remained committed to maintaining and upholding the brand of Ole Miss, just as the administrators at Ole Miss continue to work on today.

One of the ways in which the administrators of the Ole Miss Athletics Department work toward projecting the best possible image of the school and its athletics programs is by using the techniques and strategies discussed in the previous chapter. By focusing on the areas of public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions, and fundraising, the staff of the Ole Miss Athletics Department can provide its fans and surrounding communities with clear communication and a positive image of Ole Miss athletics.

### **Public and Media Relations**

In addition to serving as the home for marketing, the Ole Miss Athletics Department houses media relations, a vital piece to communicating with the media and outside publics. These employees oversee every sport in which the school participates, handling tasks from press interviews to coordinating game-day events. According to *Media Relations in Sport*,

“The effective sports information director cultivates an open and honest relationship with members of the press and the community. The relationship is based on trust and mutual respect. [...] An SID is arguably one of the most important cogs in an athletic department or sport organization, especially when it comes to promoting its coaches and athletes. The SID is the link and liaison between the media and the athletes and coaches as it pertains to publicity and promotion. During the constant interaction with the players, coaches and media as SIDs promote their team or organization, they must maintain a professional standard of confidentiality, integrity, and ethical conduct” (75-79).

Similar to public relations professionals, Sports Information Directors (SID's) have certain skills that help with communication and developing external relations, particularly through media outlets. Strong abilities in writing and public speaking are crucial components, allowing SID's to communicate efficiently and promote their respective teams and schools in a positive light.

Overseeing media and public relations for the Ole Miss Athletics Department is Kyle Campbell. Managing the media relations staff, along with the overall marketing and communications team, Campbell focuses on messaging and branding the Rebels in the best light possible.

“Every day is different for me,” Campbell said. “A lot of it depends on the time of the year and what is going on with our athletics department. Certainly my days in the fall tend to revolve around football, whereas my days during other parts of the year can be geared more toward what is prominent in the athletics department in that time.”

Campbell added that, working consistently in the area of news, “things pop up every day that you're not prepared for.” As assistant athletics director for media and public relations, it is Campbell's responsibility to address those issues to the public from a messaging and communications standpoint.

Establishing good relations with the public is key to the Ole Miss Athletics Department, a concept that Campbell works with daily.

“I think first and foremost, you want to have good relations with the city and with the University, on the academic side,” he said. “Because there is so much overlap with what all we do, it's important that we're helping them as much

as we can, and they're helping us as much as they can. The thing is, we're trying to build our fan base. That's certainly the number one goal of our marketing-communications team, is to pull fans in and hopefully move them up that ladder from being an interested fan to being a hardcore fan."

Keeping fans updated on teams and allowing fans to connect with them on a personal level is an ongoing development, but it is one that has greatly advanced Ole Miss Athletics. This growth in media and public relations is a core component to its overall success.

"I think it's huge," Campbell said. "When I first got to Ole Miss, that was probably an area where we weren't as strong as we needed to be. Certainly over the last four to five years, there's been a much greater focus on public relations and being transparent and very open with our fans. Certainly their reaction is always taken into account with every decision we make. We try to overly communicate everything and make sure our fans feel like they're in the loop with anything that occurs with our athletics department."

While there are only a handful of full-time employees in this area, the Ole Miss Athletics Department reaches out to students and depends largely on their voluntary assistance. Working under Thompson, these students gain experience in marketing and communications, learning the important factors of capturing a person's attention.

"The second piece would be media relations and public relations, which throughout the day we're just trying to manage the message and make sure that the message is accurate and that it's the message that we want out there," Thompson said. In an effort to make sure the public receives the right message, the Ole Miss Athletics

Department develops relations and works closely with both the local and national media; furthermore, they consistently update and monitor information on their own outlets, including websites and social media pages.

## **Marketing**

Ole Miss has 14 sports among male and female student-athletes, but the key spectator sports include football, baseball and men's basketball. While these are the sports that fans generally flock toward, the Ole Miss Athletics Department works to gain support for all 14 teams. "I think when you look at, by virtue of the size and scope of football, it dominates," said Stephen Ponder, director of external relations. "Basketball and baseball take a lot of time and effort."

Ponder added that smaller sports, such as soccer, take a different approach when building connections with fans. Because they have less publicity and fan interest, the Ole Miss Athletics Department focuses on attracting audiences and building attendances.

While the major sports for Ole Miss are football, baseball and men's basketball, this is not the case for every school. There are certain aspects that make these, and other sports, valuable to a school.

"(For Ole Miss), I think history," Ponder said. "There are some schools that can charge for soccer and they sell out, etc., and it goes back many, many years and the culture that was created around that program. Ole Miss has done a great job around football. Game day is just special. People come here, they've been going to college football games their whole life, and they come here and they're like, 'This is different.' Baseball is unique. There aren't many places you

can go with 11,000 people in the stands and it be the atmosphere that it is. It's like the Kentucky Derby every SEC game. Basketball is intimate. You can see kids' faces. It's a small arena, which we like. You can see the people's faces, and there's no headgear, so it's a personal connection."

Thompson and his marketing teams build from the close relationship that Ole Miss fans have to their sports teams, working closely with the school in the process. "We are part of the university, we have a huge responsibility to positively impact the university as a whole," Ponder said.

In an effort to fulfill their desire to improve and enhance the relationship between Ole Miss athletics and the Ole Miss community, and as a result build fan bases, Thompson follows several key strategies, including two in marketing and communications.

First, "We are going to personalize and humanize our student-athletes and coaches to create an emotional connection between our student-athletes and coaches and our fans and any audience that we're trying to build rapport with. That's the first one, and that's a big one. We try to look through that lens in everything we do. Creatively, we want to make sure that we are personalizing our student-athletes and coaches as much as we can.

"The second one is, we're going to try, we're going to work, we're going to do whatever we can to deliver the best game day experience possible, in every single venue that we have."

Until just recently, these decision processes and creative development procedures that are used to promote the Ole Miss brand today were all but missing.

“I have been here three years,” Thompson said. “Before that, (promoting the Ole Miss brand) didn’t exist. There wasn’t anybody that was kind of in charge of the brand until they created the position that I’m in now. I think it was pretty non-existent before then.”

Marketing such a prominent image, however, and doing so in a beneficial manner, is a crucial component to building positive external relations.

“(A brand) is nearly everything,” Thompson said. “It doesn’t matter how good your product is, it just doesn’t matter. The brand is everything of what the customer thinks. It is so vital, and the reverse is true. People can buy name brands, and they feel confident about the brand, even though the product is exactly the same as something that’s much, much cheaper. It just doesn’t have that name on it. I think brand is massively important.”

Just as marketing an image in the wrong way can damage the reputation of a company, there are several main issues that Thompson sees are common with brand endorsements.

“I think consistency (is an issue),” he said. “Staying consistent, so I guess the issue would be inconsistency. I think it’s easy for professionals that are on the marketing and branding side of things to be exposed through seven days a week to their own brand, and they believe that, ‘Oh, yeah, this logo is getting so old, we’ve had it for two years,’ because you’re around it so much, but you forget that your audience may still be thinking that it’s new. You have to always think, ‘What does the customer see? What does our target audience see? How do they feel about it?’ and make decisions like that. Inconsistency, and coming right out

of that, I think brands make a lot of decisions without sound, customer research. That's a big problem."

In working to remain consistent in their approaches to external relations, the Ole Miss Athletics Department works to market certain sports in a specific manner. As Ponder explained, the key sports that Ole Miss promotes are football, basketball and baseball. In terms of promotions and sales, Thompson adds in women's basketball. The strategies used in marketing these sports are valuable to obtaining a strong response from target audiences.

"Those four (sports) have season tickets that are linked to them," Thompson said. "Just the nature of having that season ticket, it means that we have a whole other product that we have to market. It has a different window. We do our football season tickets in March, April, May, June, so it has a long window of a sales cycle. Basketball has a three-month window; women's and men's is the same. It means that you have to get out in the market sooner rather than later and be promoting all of that beforehand. It seems like a much longer period of time, and it is, because you're promoting a whole different product. With softball or tennis, we're promoting around each event and trying to drive attendance to each event. But you don't get out there and talk about the softball game three months ahead of time, because it will be lost in the consumer's mind by the time it comes around."



## **Social Media**

When interacting with fans and the community, Campbell finds that transparency and honesty are vital. By engaging with fans constantly and informing them on all that occurs within Ole Miss athletics, the Ole Miss Athletics Department can develop strong connections with the public and create purposeful relationships with fans. Establishing such relationships, however, is a fairly modern concept to Ole Miss athletics. With changes in technology, communication has taken on an entirely different level.

“Social media and new media have certainly changed everything,”

Campbell said. “In the past, it was trying to get the media to cover your events and cover your teams. That was the number one goal, because that was how you were going to communicate with the fans. Certainly that’s still a huge part of our efforts, but at the same time, social media and new media have allowed for us to have our own voice without having to utilize media. I don’t think it’s taken away from their value. It just kind of created another outlet for us to be able to communicate with our fans. For us, really any channel that we have, we want to utilize it to the fullest.”

## **Promotions**

In addition to certain marketing strategies and forms of interactive media, the Ole Miss Athletics Department follows a series of strategies and actions to promote the teams and garner support. Among these are events that are designed particularly for fans.

“Specifically, Square Jam would be one,” Ponder said. With two successful years already in the books, the Square Jam is an up-close-and-personal

basketball event that takes place on the historic Oxford Square. Fans get to meet that season's men's and women's basketball teams, and the teams demonstrate their skills through a variety of games and drills. For football, fans have the chance to attend Meet the Rebels Day, where they can meet and greet the football team, purchase team merchandise, enter raffle drawings and learn about what the upcoming football season has in store."

Rebel Resale, while not an event that involves meeting athletes, gives fans a day to purchase a wide variety of team merchandise, including game-worn jerseys, warm-ups, shoes and stadium seats.

"We do Rebel Resale, with the gear from the teams to connect with our community," Ponder said. "Yeah, we charge for the items. We have to, legally, but we also are making a connection with our fan base. (There's also) Rebel Road Trip, when we go around to different areas. Just everyday interaction with fans. Anyone in our department, everyone has an interaction with fans somewhere along the way."

One tactic in particular that the Ole Miss Athletics Department is implementing is inviting fans to visit and watch basketball practices. In doing so, fans can view firsthand how their teams work behind the scenes. This allows fans to have an experience that is more personal than a game, helping them feel a stronger connection with the student-athletes and seeing the ways in which their support contributes to their overall success. Whether this is in terms of facility improvements or the success of student-athletes in the classroom, having events such as this can improve external relations and further develop ties with the community. While these events do not require fans to make financial

donations to athletics, they serve as opportunities for them to see what their money would be supporting and encourage them to consider making a gift.

Working alongside with Ponder is Thompson. Given the responsibility of handling the Ole Miss brand, Thompson works to enhance the image of Ole Miss athletics and its connection with the public in a positive, influential manner. He points out that he works in four key areas when it comes to promotions: marketing strategy and fan experience, media relations and public relations.

“One of these areas is marketing strategy and fan experience,” Thompson said. “It’s one of the clusters of the team that we built. What we’re trying to do there is trying to get people to games, trying to advertise games, promote games, come up with whatever the promotions are. We’re doing a lot of research on audiences and what audiences what, what resonates with them.”

Another area that Thompson works with is creative content development. “This is our team of people that do all of the things that you see, that you either watch or look at,” Thompson said. “It’s posters, it’s our graphic design, everything from designing our tickets to designing posters and websites.”

Additionally, Thompson works directly with the Ole Miss Athletic Department’s video team, which produces a “weekly television show for football and men’s basketball on several cable networks throughout the week,” known as “The Season.” The productions crew also develops a number of other pieces that are shared with the public, including run-on videos for student-athletes, kickoff videos, hype videos and other projects related to student-athletes and their respective sports.

## **Fundraising**

The Ole Miss Athletics Foundation is the department dedicated to raising revenue for the school's athletic programs. "Formerly known as the UMAA Foundation and Loyalty Foundation, it has existed as a revenue generator for the athletic department since July 1, 1969" (Ole Miss Athletics Foundation).

Under the direction of Keith Carter, associate athletic director for development, the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation works to incorporate fans into the game, allowing them to do more than simply watch sporting events and helping teams as they compete for championships. This sense of inclusiveness and building relationships makes the Ole Miss Athletics Foundations the most crucial factor of the University of Mississippi for establishing external relations and generating financial support for athletics.

Stephen Ponder, director of external relations at the University of Mississippi is, in a sense, the middle man between the Ole Miss Athletics Department and the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, doing whatever it takes to build strong external relations and garner financial support for Ole Miss Athletics.

"My position is to work the external areas of the department, which would be fundraising, marketing, tickets and facilities, which include game operations and coordinating all those areas so that everyone's on the same page," Ponder said. "We really produce maximum results, whether it be in revenue, ticket sales, what have you, but at the same time customer satisfaction. Traffic, parking, game attendance, suites, that type of thing."

The relationship between the Ole Miss community and athletics is an area that Ponder and the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation know and understand is a crucial component when finding support and reaching out to external audiences.

“I think it’s intertwined,” he said. “Ole Miss, the culture of Ole Miss, the brand of Ole Miss, makes athletics special and, in recruiting terms, cool. Without that, without that feel that Ole Miss is, that’s special, Ole Miss athletics would not be as successful as they are. I think athletics promotes and protects the Ole Miss brand, as well.”

Keeping this close tie between Ole Miss and athletics in mind, the staff members of the Ole Miss Athletic Department and Ole Miss Athletics Foundation find ways to develop good external relations with students, fans, prospective students and other outside communities.

“Our fundraising staff does a lot of face-to-face visits,” Ponder said. “Any call, question, anything that comes, we respond to, which I think, from a communications standpoint, when (fans are) asking questions, we need to answer. We have a program, Rebel Rewards, for the (University’s) students and try to engage them, entice them to get involved, not just in football, but in every sport. In communications, whether it be online, with Twitter, studio shows, anything we can do that gives people information about our program helps. (With) “The Season,” (the Ole Miss Athletics Department’s weekly television production showing how teams function behind the scenes) our fans get an inside look, and it becomes personal.”

Revenue matters are not limited to the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation. In the Ole Miss Athletics Department, Thompson works with the area of sponsorship. Employees spend the majority of their team connecting with different companies and people who might wish to provide support as well as display their brand with a larger audience.

“That’s anything from a sign that you may see in the stadium to a Chevron t-shirt that we pass out at every basketball game, whatever that is,” Thompson said. “Anything like that, we’re trying to find companies that want to pair with Ole Miss. That’s kind of the gist of it. Any day is kind of working through one of those key areas.”

As the fundraising arm of the Ole Miss athletics, it is crucial that staff members of the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation develop good relationships with donors and potential donors, as well as ensuring that the reputation of the program is a positive one. One of the key ways in which the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation updates supporters of its progress and developments is through their annual report, which provides a review of the previous year’s successes and their hopes for future donations. As an intern with the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, I had the opportunity to gather and construct this information for the 2012-2013 annual report. This year’s report, while typically printed as its own publication, is part of the University of Mississippi’s annual report, combined with every department of the University, including the University of Mississippi Medical Center. To introduce Ole Miss athletics, the annual report contains a headline letter, one of the pieces that I was assigned to write. As explained in the role of the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation’s annual reports, it gives readers a summary of the past year in athletics, connecting it to their support and donations and encouraging them to continue, and

ideally increase, their level of giving to athletics. The following passages are taken from the report I wrote:

“From Brittney Reese’s Olympic gold medal, to a winning football season and Compass Bowl victory in Head Coach Hugh Freeze’s first year, to a Southeastern Conference men’s basketball championship and NCAA berth, Ole Miss Athletics has excelled in ways this year that have reached higher levels of achievement, building more pride across the university community. The flagship university of Mississippi has seen tremendous recognition nationally and beyond. There has never been a more exciting time to be a Rebel, and none of this success would be possible without you, our donors. Through your support, we can continue to soar toward greatness, helping student-athletes surpass their loftiest goals.

‘The Ole Miss Athletics Foundation would like to thank its members for their ongoing allegiance to our school,’ said Keith Carter, executive director of the OMAF. ‘Your loyalty and generosity have sparked a movement in Ole Miss Athletics that will take our program to the next level.’

With your support, tremendous progress has been made in the Forward Together campaign, making dreams become realities. From expansion of the Indoor Practice Facility, to a brand new, state-of-the-art basketball arena, to renovations of Vaught-Hemingway Stadium and the Gillom Center, student-athletes will benefit from this new stage of excellence.

This year’s Annual Report recognizes your support, outlines financial successes and shows the impact of your gifts on our progress. The report also

provides examples of the accomplishments that student-athletes have achieved both on and off the field and courts of play.

‘2012-13 was a great year in Rebel Athletics both in the classroom and in competition,’ said Ross Bjork, director of athletics. ‘The generous support received from our donors allowed us to improve the experience for our student-athletes and develop students to their fullest potential through athletics.’

Rebel Nation is consistently moving toward championships, and none of it would be possible without you. Thank you for your continued support and for helping us move Forward Together!”

As the letter explains, the remainder of the report provides lists of the accomplishments made by student-athletes from each sport both on and off the field. This ranges anywhere from which student-athletes made the honor roll and who made the SEC Community Service Team. Regardless, these accomplishments are shown to give donors the sense that their contributions are making a difference in the lives of these student-athletes, proving that their gifts are, ultimately, guiding student-athletes toward success beyond the court.

One of the perquisites of becoming an Ole Miss Athletics Foundation member is invitations to exclusive events both on and off the Ole Miss campus. While these events are, essentially, encouragements for members to make financial donations, they are also a chance to build external relations, strengthening the Ole Miss community and increasing the level of loyalty that fans have toward athletics. During the summer of 2013, an event was held in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium solely for physicians in the northeast Mississippi area and their guests. With an elegant string ensemble and tasteful displays



of Ole Miss colors and décor, the party guests had the opportunity to explore the clubs of the south end zone. Several key speakers thanked them for their support of Ole Miss athletics; furthermore, they were able to learn what their money and support was going toward, and the various ways in which they could contribute to the investment of championships.

Shortly after this event, there was a party held in the new football team locker room, an event reserved for Vaught Society members and their families. Because the locker room was one of the first improvements to be completed, members were able to see first-hand inside the walls of Ole Miss football and inside the world of their team. Guests were entertained by tours of the locker room area, along with the chance to have a photograph taken in front of the locker room's entrance. The staff of the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation attended, as well, speaking with members, thanking them for their ongoing support and answering any questions they had about upcoming changes and improvements. As the focal point of the evening, Athletic Director Ross Bjork addressed the audience, welcoming guests to the new locker room and inviting them to feel at home. Bjork proceeded to visit individually with guests, establishing personal connections and building relationships that influence positive reactions and feedback from Vaught Society members. Such personal contact helps build external relations, giving a more meaningful feeling to the support that fans provide. This concept also contributes to the idea of the Ole Miss family, a community that is more than just a school with an athletics program; rather, Ole Miss is a family atmosphere, with a powerful bond that makes the school a special place to be a part of.

One of the most recent and more memorable events put on by the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation was the premiere of “The Book of Manning,” an ESPN film. While this event was not exclusively for Vaught Society members or other Ole Miss Athletics Foundation members, it did require a ticket, which was available for purchase through the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation. Prior to the event, which was held at the Gertrude C. Ford Center, there was a reception across the street at the Memory House. From there, those in attendance were invited to walk on a red carpet, draped in front of the Ford Center and complete with photograph opportunities. This allowed fans and supporters to have a true red carpet experience to a film premiere that was so near and dear to the heart of Ole Miss. In addition to a showing of the film, the director and film crew from ESPN made a few remarks, explaining the film and providing an inside look at the making of it. After the film concluded, Archie Manning gave a brief speech, thanking ESPN and Ole Miss for the opportunity to share his family’s story. The film features the entire Manning family, and although Peyton and Eli were unable to attend, Archie was accompanied by his wife, Olivia, along with their oldest son, Cooper, and his family.

During the premiere of “The Book of Manning”, Ross Bjork announced the renaming of the Indoor Practice Facility, the building in which the football and track teams practice, meet and work out. As of that morning, the Indoor Practice Facility was renamed as the Olivia and Archie Manning Athletics Performance Center. With the help of Archie’s close friend and avid Ole Miss athletics support Billy Van Devender, Ole Miss was able to surprise the Mannings, giving them a unique and special gift that the entire Ole Miss community can cherish.

Keeping the consumer in mind is a key angle that both the Ole Miss Athletics Department and Ole Miss Athletics Foundation use when approaching both daily tasks and plans for the future. Doing what they can to monitor the way various publics perceive them, whether in terms of students, alumni, fans, or the rest of the nation, the ways in which they present themselves can have a major impact on Ole Miss. By reaching out to publics, keeping them informed and attempting to make them feel a sense of inclusion are vital methods that the Ole Miss Athletics Department must continue to follow in order to see further success. Building Rebel Nation into a community that is strong and supportive is important to the future development of Ole Miss athletics, and establishing such external relations will allow the Ole Miss Athletics Department to so efficiently and fruitfully for years to come.

### **Chapter 3: Other Schools' Approaches to Athletics and Promotions**

“Public relations is the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Wilcox 5). This is how Dennis L. Wilcox and Glen T. Cameron define public relations in their text, *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics*. Both the Ole Miss athletics department and Ole Miss Athletics Foundation depend on following this concept, as do numerous colleges and universities across the nation.

Thus far, I have discussed the efforts and strategies that the University of Mississippi and its athletics department use to communicate with the public and develop strong external relations. In this chapter, I will turn my focus toward other schools, analyzing how they approach athletics and the ways in which they use athletics as a promotion tool. Through a series of interviews with people who either work currently with or have worked with their respective athletic departments, I have gathered information about the University of Louisville, Vanderbilt University, the University of Florida and the University of Michigan. I selected these schools to demonstrate how athletics departments from different athletic conference approach external relations. Like Ole Miss, Vanderbilt and the University of Florida offer perspectives on schools in the Southeastern Conference. The University of Louisville, while previously a member of the American Athletic Conference, will join the Atlantic Coast Conference this year, while the University of Michigan represents the Big Ten Conference.

The strategies that each of these schools follows fall under basic public relations techniques, fundamentals for shining the brightest light on any organization. According to Wilcox and Cameron, “Public relations is a process – that is, a series of actions, changes, or functions that bring about a result” (8). Through the use of plans such as campaigning, connecting with the community, and marketing, schools’ athletics organizations consistently examine which areas function well and which ones do not, altering in order to benefit both the organization and external audiences.

A crucial part of establishing a strong connection with external, target audiences is to understand those audiences. To properly do so, athletics organizations follow the basic acronym, R.A.C.E., which stands for research, action, communication and evaluation. After researching and studying audiences, organizations can implement actions catered to those audiences, communicating with them in the most effective ways possible. As Wilcox and Cameron put it, “Public relations is concerned with building relationships and generating goodwill for the organization; marketing is concerned with customers and selling products and services” (18). Athletics departments generally combine these concepts, using the strengths of both public relations and marketing to attract their desired publics. After executing their targeted plans, organizations must evaluate their results, determining what strategies worked and which ones did not, learning how to improve their tactics and strengthen their external relations. Below is a comparison of the ways in which the above-mentioned schools follow various public relations and marketing techniques, demonstrating how schools’ athletics departments promote athletics and garner support.

## **Public and Media Relations**

### **The University of Louisville**

The University of Louisville is a prime example of the impact that athletic success can have on a school, improving its fan base and strengthening its core support. Whether through financial campaigns or team victories, within the past year, the Louisville Cardinals have seen a variety of notable achievements, putting them on the map in college athletics.

“The combination of the national championship in men’s basketball, an appearance in the women’s national championship game, a BCS bowl victory, and an appearance in the College World Series earned the Cards the “Best in College Sports Award” for 2012-13 from CBSSports.com” (Lintner).

This statement appeared in an article in *The Courier-Journal*, the major newspaper in the city of Louisville. According to Josh Nicholas, a graduate student in the University of Louisville’s sport administration program, the relationship between the university and athletics is cohesive, and the city plays a major role in that connection.

“The school is considered a metropolitan research institution,” Nicholas said. “Students living on campus reached a record high this year, and much of that is believed to be due to the NCAA championship in basketball. U of L’s slogan for athletics is ‘Best College Sports Town in America.’ I think the success found through athletics has carried over to academics and has helped secure funds for the future.”

## **Vanderbilt University**

As one of the top academic schools in the Southeastern Conference, Vanderbilt University strives for excellence through its athletics both on and off the field. The mission statement, as found on the Vanderbilt athletics website, states:

“We prepare student-athletes to become leaders and champions in life by placing the highest values on integrity, character, sportsmanship and victory.”

This mindset, from which each sport propels and functions, allows the Commodores to recruit student-athletes who will become assets for their various athletics programs, enhancing it beyond the field or court. While Vanderbilt’s only national championship was won in women’s bowling, their teams have seen considerable success in recent years, putting the Commodores on the radar of highly competitive schools. The connection that exists between the Vanderbilt community and athletics is one that, according to Drew Fann, director of baseball operations for Vanderbilt, is thriving.

“Vanderbilt’s overall culture is very prestigious and academic,” Fann said.

“Historically, our athletic programs have not been as closely associated with our school’s culture as many of the other schools in our conference. Yet with the development and advances in technology during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which allow many of our sporting events to be streamed via television or online, I believe that the cultures are becoming more unified. Each sporting event shown on TV or online is an opportunity for us to advertise our great school and its brand to millions of households, and Vanderbilt is doing a great job of taking advantage of these opportunities.”

## **Marketing**

### **The University of Louisville**

The Cardinal Athletic Foundation has several key sports that they focus on and market to encourage monetary support.

“Premium seating options are offered for football and men’s basketball,” Nicholas said. “These two sports are used to promote fundraising. However, if you take a look at the capital projects and recent renovations and expansions, most of them are related to the University of Louisville’s Olympic sports (soccer stadium, field hockey, softball, etc.). The reason the U of L has great Olympic facilities is because they had a vision of hosting conference tournaments while they were in the Big East, and that vision has carried over to the ACC. I think the thing that sets U of L’s athletic program apart from most schools is their facilities and coaches. I’m not sure of any school who has ever won a BCS bowl, NCAA championship, runner-up for women’s basketball, go to the College World Series, and go to the Elite 8 in men’s soccer.”

### **Vanderbilt University**

In the same way that the University of Mississippi has certain sports that are more popular than others – football, basketball and baseball – Vanderbilt University has similar fan favorites.

“There is not a certain sport that we focus on more than others, but there are certain sports – football, men’s and women’s basketball, and to an extent, baseball – that are televised and streamed more than others,” Fann said.

“Regardless, we focus on each sport with the same intensity, enthusiasm, and care. Each student-athlete at Vanderbilt is as important as the next. We take



pride in preparing all of our student-athletes for their post-collegiate careers, whether it be in professional sports or in the business world.”

### **The University of Florida**

The University of Florida’s athletics department and support-raising groups work to market each sport, both men’s and women’s, but there are several sports that have appeared to be the most popular among fans.

“Florida is a football school,” said Jimena Panduro, a recent graduate of the University of Florida and an intern in its athletics department. “That’s the sport that brings the money in. As of late, because of the success of men’s basketball, that sport has also started to contribute heavily to the money donations. What makes these sports the largest contributors is that they are the most successful and, more than anything, popular. Gymnastics and Track have won a combined six national championships in the last three years, yet men’s basketball and football are still the ones that run the UAA budget, primarily because of ticket sales, something the other two sports previously mentioned don’t really produce.”

According to Jones, the key to marketing sports and drawing fans comes not from the most popular sports, but from winning.

“I would say that the athletics department, although we care about all of our sports and their representation, puts the most time and effort into football and men’s basketball,” Jones said. “However, winning is everything. When our smaller market teams win, they draw more attention and more fan base. That’s

just life. Once again, we use social media more than anything else to reach our customer base.”

### **The University of Michigan**

As far as which sports garner the most attention and fan support, Jessica Poole, the current sports information director for women’s basketball at Ole Miss and formerly with the University of Michigan, thinks it all depends on schools’ methods of choice.

“I think that successful programs and programs with visible and accessible coaches are the easiest to promote and get people to support financially,” she said.

“Additionally, people always want to be involved with the revenue sports (football, men’s and women’s basketball) so I think again, it’s much easier to sell those programs.”

### **Social Media**

#### **The University of Louisville**

Taking advantage of new technology and utilizing resources such as social media is a beneficial way to communicate with fans and attract attention for financial support. In a recent campaign by The Cardinal Athletic Fund, staff members turned to social media to raise both awareness and donations. “We used our social media websites to communicate this campaign in order to raise \$1 million for the new academic center,” Nicholas said. “Social media has allowed The Cardinal Athletic Fund to expand the Cardinal athletics brand add new donors.”

Because of the tremendous success that the University of Louisville establishing connections and finding support through social media, athletics administrators have

added a position devoted entirely to monitoring social media interaction. According to Nicholas, Nick Stover, now the director of social media and engagement, “is responsible for the oversight of social media strategies across all components of the Athletic Association related to content, branding and fundraising efforts. Communicating through social media has become an effective and efficient way to communicate mass messages about your brand while engaging your audience.”

### **The University of Florida**

In addition to the efforts made by the University Athletic Association to reach out to the community and develop an inclusive atmosphere, Panduro added, “Through social media efforts and campus-wide activities and promotions, the UAA works to strengthen this culture in order to positively impact not only its own organization but also every fan of the Gator Nation.”

Jones added the importance of utilizing modern technology as a means of continuing to build strong connections with fans.

“With such a good relationship, it is easy for the department to connect with fans,” Jones said. “This year in particular has been a huge year for social media, especially on Instagram. Many sports that did not have Instagram accounts before began one this year, and the exposure of it has grown exponentially. Florida is very good at listening to what the people want and giving it back to them.”

### **The University of Michigan**

According to Poole, the University of Michigan uses social media as an additional way to promote sports, coaches and teams.

“Michigan has taken it a step further by allowing sponsorship rights to certain Facebook and Twitter promotions, which have helped increase the social media fan base,” Poole said. “Many fans are now using social media as a way to watch sporting events ‘live,’ and Michigan has embraced that by creating social media widgets and aggregates that allow fans the most up-to-date info from various Twitter accounts and Facebook pages. I think that Michigan has really integrated all of its social media together to better serve the fans.”

## **Promotions**

### **The University of Louisville**

The University of Louisville has a website devoted to the funding of its athletic programs. The site, <http://chartingourcourse.org/goals/>, outlines the campaigning efforts and progress of the school and its supporters. In a campaign titled “Charting Our Course,” the site explains:

“It is the unwavering determination of our students, the superior talent and passion of our faculty, the perpetual quest for solutions by our researchers and the pride and fortitude of our community that will make the transformation of this university a reality. Theirs are the voices that encourage us to do more, be more and achieve more.

To become a premier metropolitan research university, UofL has initiated a bold campaign to raise an unprecedented \$1 billion in private support by 2015. While we have already made significant progress toward this goal, there is still much to be accomplished.

The campaign will strengthen the University's capacities to recruit and retain outstanding faculty critical to the institution's success in teaching, research and outreach. It will focus resources on educational programs and capital expenditures that are vital to ensuring the national competitiveness of our graduates and help create an environment conducive to living, learning and working. At its core, the campaign will seek funding that will make a UofL education accessible to greater numbers of deserving individuals and reduce their level of indebtedness upon graduation to the greatest extent possible."

The strategies behind this campaign - to benefit all components and contributors to the University of Louisville as well as the athletics programs – are geared specifically to garner support. By incorporating multiple publics, the campaign avoids isolating athletics and asking for support solely for those programs; rather, it emphasizes improving the university as a whole, establishing effective relations with both internal and external audiences.

Additionally, the University of Louisville will move to the ACC (Atlantic Coast Conference) in 2014, which, according to Nicholas, "has stringent academic requirements of their member institutions. U of L's success on the field led them to the ACC, which has led to raising the bar for academics." This helps bring the campaigning efforts full circle, encouraging the school to improve on every level.

### **Vanderbilt University**

As Vanderbilt athletics administrators are discovering new ways to reach the community and other audiences, they are simultaneously making a strong effort to

develop external relations, encouraging support from fans and, consequently, obtaining new ones.

“We have all sorts of community outreach programs,” Fann said. “For instance, our football team has Dore Jam every August, a meet-and-greet with the football team that includes events, food, and autographs. Our baseball team is an active participant each year in the Nashville Walk to Defeat ALS, and they also sign autographs and various basketball and football games. Our entire group of student-athletes gets together every December to host a Christmas party for a group of local children, and they also purchase gifts for them. Each May, our student-athletes host a field day for children as well. As far as business-related relationships, our ticket office offers group discounts, and our marketing department works closely with our corporate sponsors.”

### **The University of Florida**

Whether facing a championship season or a losing season, the University of Florida’s athletics department works to both obtain and maintain support from its fans and community.

“The UAA (University Athletic Association) strives to connect with and provide fans with the best experience when it comes to partaking in our sporting events,” Panduro said. “The culture of this town, university, and athletic teams, helps in building a strong foundation of support and positive atmosphere.”

As explained on their website, the UAA’s describes the organization through its mission statement, placing a unique emphasis on diversity and gender equality as a key component:

“The University Athletic Association, Inc. exists to advance the University of Florida’s teaching, research and service missions. Through the education and the promotion of the health and welfare of students, the University Athletic Association seeks to link experiences of all backgrounds, races, origins, genders, and cultures to prepare generations of students and staff, including women and minorities, to be productive members of society. The character of the athletics programs at the University Athletic Association reflects the character of the University of Florida as a major, public, comprehensive institution of higher learning.

“The University Athletic Association is dedicated to the intellectual, physical and personal development of student-athletes, as well as staff, including women and minorities. Demonstrating leadership in all decisions affecting college athletics, the University Athletic Association will act in an ethical and honest manner, will promote an environment fostering the professional and personal achievement of coaches, administrators and staff, will attain excellence in athletic performance, sportsmanship, financial strength, and superior fan satisfaction. This vision in athletics is at the core of our responsibility to the University, to our students and to the public at large.”

### **The University of Michigan**

“Michigan was able to partner with the University on marketing promotions and initiatives (examples include Hospital Sponsoring events such as Pink Games) and also had several of the more prominent athletes past and present

partner to help raise money (Celebrity Golf Outing to raise money for Mott's Children's hospital)," Poole said.

## **Fundraising**

### **The University of Louisville**

The key to successful branding is obtaining support. To handle this, the University of Louisville has The Cardinal Athletic Fund, which seeks to raise money for athletics. While this aims at general fans, alums and other community members, there is a separate foundation that caters specifically to students. Recently installed, the Student Cardinal Athletic Fund, a piece of the Cardinal Athletic Fund that provides an opportunity for current University of Louisville students to show their support for the athletic programs.

"The Cardinal Athletic Fund has raised funds for several new facilities and currently has five capital projects underway," said Nicholas. "I personally think the school does a great job of using local media outlets to promote their brand and raise awareness. Tom Jurich (director of athletics) is basically a rock star in Louisville."

### **Vanderbilt University**

While the athletics department works to cater to the needs and desires of fans, the organization that focuses solely on fundraising is the National Commodore Club.

"The National Commodore Club oversees the fundraising and donation efforts for us," Fann said. "The cost of our scholarships comprises about 1/3 of our athletics budget, so their job is vital to the success of our athletic department."



## **The University of Florida**

When dealing specifically with financial support and fundraising strategies, the University of Florida relies on a group known as Gator Boosters.

“The Gator Boosters are an organization that encompasses donors from all socio-economic statuses that wish to donate to the athletics department,” Panduro said. “Boosters can be alumni and/or fans, and donations vary from a few hundred a year to millions. Top-tier donors will usually be the ones with their names on stadiums or facilities and will be the ones that heavily contribute to the UAA budget. Boosters have their own department that works in conjunction with the rest of the UAA in order to reach out to possible donors.”

Beneath its mission statement, which says, “The mission of Gator Boosters, Inc. is to strengthen the University of Florida’s athletic program by encouraging private giving and volunteer leadership from Gators everywhere,” the organization outlines its goals, explaining why people should become members and encouraging them to share support:

“Gator Boosters is dedicated to two (2) major goals. First and foremost is to educate our student-athletes. We provide scholarship funding to pay the academic costs of all of our scholarship athletes, providing them with one of the finest educations available anywhere. Secondly, we are constantly building, or improving our athletic facilities for Gator student-athletes to be given the opportunity to compete in the finest facilities.

“Our campus boasts one of the best overall groups of athletic facilities anywhere. We are very appreciative and proud of the commitment of our Gator Booster membership to make that happen.

“One project that will insure our long-term future is the Endowment program. An Endowed gift will help fund the education of countless student-athletes, for years to come.” (Gator Boosters, Inc.)

### **The University of Michigan**

While charitable events and celebrity appearances have proven useful in developing strong external relations, departments dedicated specifically to raising money for athletics is a common feature at schools across the nation, as Poole has found in her work at the University of Michigan, Dartmouth College and the University of Mississippi.

“At each school I’ve been at, each athletics department has a branch to fundraise money,” she said. “At all of those schools, with the exception of Ole Miss, that area has been employed by the athletics department. From all that I’ve experienced, I think that successful programs promote themselves and lend themselves to people wanting to be involved. Additionally, I think that coaches that make themselves visible in the community and make themselves accessible also make it much easier to get people to want to support financially.”

### **Preparing for the Future**

#### **The University of Louisville**

While the Cardinals have seen considerable success in recent history, both in terms of athletic achievements and fundraising, they are still looking toward the future, planning for what lies ahead for the University of Louisville. In order to plan accordingly

for academics, student life, outside support and athletic development, several strategies are being put in place.

“The University is using athletics to promote their future by moving to the ACC,” Nicholas said. “U of L will generate more revenue and require students to meet new standards. U of L is also in the midst of buying more land and constructing a research park, which will connect the football and baseball stadium to the University. U of L is opening their new recreational center in the next few months, and will probably build another dorm in the future since they are currently at capacity.”

### **Vanderbilt University**

Through the efforts of the National Commodore Club and Vanderbilt’s athletics Department, Vanderbilt is looking toward future developments and enhancements, making the Commodore presence more prominent in Nashville and beyond.

“As an athletic department, I believe that we will continue to grow by focusing on the growth of our student-athletes, our coaches and employees, and our facilities,” Fann said. “There seems to be an arms race for facilities in the Southeastern Conference. We are fortunate to have just completed our \$31 million indoor athletics facility, and we are in the process of fundraising for our new athletic training facility. As a former student-athlete (2008-2012) and current athletic department employee at Vanderbilt, I could not be more proud of the enhancements and improvements we have made in our athletic facilities since I was a freshman.

“Another prime tool upcoming for Vanderbilt is the launch of the SEC Network on August 1, 2014. This new channel allows us to promote and celebrate our teams like never before. We will be able to showcase our student-athletes, their coaches, and notable alumni in a high-profiled manner. I am very excited about the future of the SEC, its television network, and Vanderbilt University. I am very fortunate to work for such a great organization, and I hope to be around to see all of the great events that are in our near future.”

### **The University of Florida**

Panduro sees the University Florida’s athletics as a key component for recruitment, not just in terms of student-athletes, but for students in general. This is an element that can help the school prepare for the future, regardless of whether the Gators have winning or losing seasons.

“Several students apply to Florida, the University, in order to be able to and be exposed to the Gators, the athletic teams.” Panduro said. “With the popularity and success of the sports at Florida, the University takes advantage of this a bit and tacitly uses it as a luring technique for students. In the future, I don’t see any of this changing. In fact, I see it increasing. The culture of athletics and universities grows and depends more each day. I don’t know if this is necessarily a good or bad thing, but it could be interesting to watch.”

Because it has such a large athletics program, Jones sees the University of Florida excelling in the future, both in terms of monetary success and team success.

“Florida is very lucky in that they are one of only a few schools in the country that can actually make a profit off of their athletics at the end of a fiscal

year,” Jones said. “Florida is such a big program that I don’t think they will have issues getting money from donors in the future, but they are always looking for ways to renovate and improve our facilities to keep athletes wanting to come here and keep our winning tradition. Connecting with the alumni is the most important aspect, and the fact that UF is so prestigious makes that job that much easier.”

### **The University of Michigan**

In some cases, the success of an athletics department can be contagious, spreading over to other parts of the school. According to Poole, this is the case at the University of Michigan.

“In every place that I’ve worked, if your athletics department is successful, you see the benefits on the academic side,” Poole said. “Enrollment goes up, general giving for the university goes up, etc. Again, at every school that I’ve been in, athletics and the University are very much connected; you really can’t be successful at one without the other. At Michigan, the athletics department is self-sustaining, one of the few athletics departments that doesn’t take money from the University. Instead, the athletics department gives money to the University each year.”

As schools and their athletics programs begin to find ways and approaches that best match their external publics, success and progress become evident. Such achievements encourage schools to continue moving forward, feeding off of the needs of not only their student-athletes but also the desires of fans and members of outside communities. Discovering fulfilling tactics and beneficial strategies for improving

support and strengthening external relations allows these programs to maximize their accomplishments and, consequently, prepare for the future.

## Chapter 4: Handling Crises

In any area of profession, there is the risk of facing a crisis. Knowing how to handle a crisis properly and avoid future issues is a fundamental and critical public relations technique. Wilcox and Cameron explain exactly what a crisis is in the world of public relations.

“Perhaps the best definition [...] is provided by Pacific Telesis, the parent company of Pacific Bell. Its manual on crisis communication says that a crisis is ‘an extraordinary event or series of events that adversely affects the integrity of the product, the reputation or financial stability of the organization; or the health or well-being of employees, the community, or the public at large’” (258).

As far as how to handle a crisis, Wilcox and Cameron offer a simple, straightforward list of steps. In addition to taking responsibility and being transparent and honest, they write:

- Put the public first
- Never say, “No comment.”
- Designate a single spokesperson.
- Set up a central information center.
- Provide a constant flow of information.
- Be familiar with media needs and deadlines.
- Be accessible.
- Monitor news coverage and telephone inquiries.
- Communicate with key publics (260-261).

The world of sports frequently sees crises in multiple areas, ranging from collegiate to professional teams. Since schools and teams are prominent in the public eye, any news that they attract – especially crises – tends to gain media attention on both local and national.

“A crisis for a sport organization is any event, incident, or issue that falls outside the organization. Crises can strike at any time – crises such as the arrest of an athlete, the dismissal of a coach, or an upset loss in a key game. Crises can also develop slowly over a period of time; for example, frequent criticism of a coach by a disgruntled reporter. Crises can also grow out of long-standing issues, such as lack of coverage of men’s lo-profile sports and women’s sports” (Schultz 191).

Further describing the various crises that can emerge in a sports setting, the authors of *Media Relations in Sport* offer three situations that tend to apply to most crises:

“1. The battle for public support during the crisis is usually won or lost in the first 24 hours.

2. The sport organization will probably lose the battle of public perception if representatives of the organization fail to develop specific procedures for early and regular communication with the public during the crisis.

3. The more complex the crisis procedure, the less likely they are to succeed” (191).

There can, however, be hope for success. While crises themselves can bring about damage, the actual results lie in how organizations choose to handle them. Sports



Media Challenge, in a post describing different crisis-related events and how to approach them, writes,

“A crisis, by definition, means bad news. But, with a team approach and a playbook of options, your department can pull off a spectacular comeback.

Whether an athlete is arrested for a drug or alcohol offense, or a coach is accused of sexual harassment, no crisis seems like it will ever produce anything positive.

But the truth is, when handled correctly, even a negative event can end up leaving your stakeholders with a more positive image of your organization.”

At the University of Mississippi, athletics has seen a share of crises, and, as a result, has had to determine the most appropriate ways of handling them. According to Kyle Campbell, assistant athletics director for media and public relations, facing crises occurs on a daily basis.

“We deal with crises every day,” Campbell said. “It’s nonstop, with an athletics department this size and under the kind of scrutiny we have. With each of those, it’s just a matter of following protocol, making sure that you’re including the appropriate individuals each step of the way. Then just trying to handle those in a professional and considerate way.”

As far as handling crises properly, Campbell says that being transparent and addressing the issue quickly are crucial components. “That’s really been the key, I think, to handle crises successfully,” he said. “As soon as it hits, respond quickly and honestly. From that point on, you follow protocol.”

Stephen Ponder, director of external relations at the University of Mississippi, explains the necessity of having a crisis management plan in place and having that

protocol to follow, rendering schools capable of handling whatever crisis is thrown their way:

“The world of athletics faces a variety of crises day in and day out, and universities are no exception. While schools may not face crises and obstacles often, they should have in place a crisis management plan in place. This allows schools to feel secure and prepared if and when they face a difficult situation. In some places, such as the University of Mississippi, crisis management plans have already been implemented and executed. Crises that other schools have dealt with will be discussed in a later chapter, but Stephen Ponder offers his perspective on handling crises, especially from an athletic standpoint at Ole Miss.

“Last year (2012) we had a crisis with our women’s basketball program. We had an issue and a responsibility of knowing the rules. Ultimately, the head coach is responsible for everyone on their staff. (The issue) ultimately cost (the women’s head basketball coach) his job, because his staff members were acting inappropriately, and as a head coach, he’s responsible. We had to deal with that right before the season.”

Having a prevention plan in place can help organizations avoid crises, or at least the negative effects that can result from crises. According to *Media Relations in Sport*,

“[c]risis prevention is the panacea for public relations dilemmas; that is, SIDs must try to stop problems before they start. For times when there is no doubt that the information will come out, crisis management limits the damage, at best. The best PR plans as it pertains to crisis management are the ones never

heard or made public because they were tackled and solved before the crises had legs to run on” (200).

In order to handle situations revolving around athletics, Ole Miss has a specific crisis management team.

“We have a team that works on it, (but) I don’t know if it’s written down,” Ponder said. “The university has a crisis management overall, but for athletics, we’ve got a team that’s in place for crisis management, which would include media relations. If it involved student-athletes, academics, it depends on what it involves as to who’s plugged in. Obviously, the athletic director, then components of, ‘Okay, who needs to be here?’”

While there are people specifically assigned to handle crises, the types of crises that they face can result in different approaches that they use to handle them.

“It depends on what a crisis is,” Michael Thompson, senior associate athletics director for communications and marketing, said. “It could be a brand crisis or it could be a human crisis, like if someone dies. We could possibly say that the mascot (change) was kind of a crisis, maybe. We could say that Benny Abram, who was a football player who died on the field here, right before I got here, (was a crisis). That was a human crisis right then and there. I wasn’t here at the time, but then I was here for when we were sued because of it. That was kind of a brand crisis. There are all kinds of different pieces. My involvement, personally, in those, is I kind of serve as an advisor on how we’re going to communicate, what we’re going to say and when we’re going to say it.”

When schools face a crisis, they also face the risk of their reputation and their brand being damaged, sometimes severely.

“Depending on the size of the crisis and how deep it is, it can have massive impact,” Thompson said. “You look at Penn State and athletics and how that horrible case has deeply affected the Penn State brand. I mean deeply. It doesn’t matter where, whether the biology department, the engineering department, whatever, what one guy did, from an athletics position, has deeply and negatively hurt that brand. To overcome it, I’m a huge believer in you tell the truth, and you face the facts. Just always tell the truth, it’s the way you have to do it. In Miami, and you look at other places where big investigations have, for lack of a better word, tarnished their brands, it happens. I believe that the more forthcoming you are, and this goes for any business, the more transparent and honest you are, it doesn’t matter if you’re a bank, a grocery store chain, whatever, transparency is just critical to overcoming that and overcoming it in a shorter amount of time.”

One of the most recent and notable crises dealt with by a school’s athletics program was the issue of Jerry Sandusky and Penn State University. In an article on ESPN.com, reporters explain that Sandusky was a former assistant football coach for the Penn State Nittany Lions. The article, posted in November 2011, states:

“Sandusky was arrested Saturday on charges that he preyed on boys he met through The Second Mile, a charity he founded for at-risk youths. The charity said in a statement Sunday that Sandusky has had no involvement with its

programs involving children since 2008, when Sandusky told the foundation that he was being investigated.”

This report of abuse, however, was not the first. According to the article, this relates to a report from 2002, “the year a student claimed to see [Sandusky] assault a child in a locker room shower” (ESPN.com).

Joe Paterno, then-head coach of Penn State’s football team, apparently knew about the 2002 incident but did not report it to authorities, perhaps in an effort to protect both his and his staff’s image, along with the success of the Nittany Lions. With these recent reports, however, both Sandusky and Paterno faced the negative consequences of their actions, or lack thereof. The article explains:

“Paterno has long had an image as a leader who does things by the book and runs a program that has seen far fewer major scandals than other major college football teams. But doubts about his judgment in handling the Sandusky matter quickly began to emerge.

Facebook users, including those on a newly created group called ‘Joe Paterno should resign,’ expressed outrage and disappointment in Paterno. Many said Paterno should have gone to police after the 2002 incident.

At Rinaldo’s Barber Shop in State College, hair cutter Lori Schope said she believes Paterno shares responsibility.

‘He passed the buck,’ she said. ‘Anybody that says they knew about it and didn’t do anything about it is complicit.’

As of Monday, Penn State had not lost any of its 16 committed recruits for 2012. But the unfolding scandal could cost the Nittany Lions in their pursuit of

Noah Spence (Harrisburg, Pa./Bishop McDevitt), who is ranked No. 4 in the ESPNU 150.

A post on Spence's Twitter account Monday read: 'Um psu might be a no no for me ewwww'" (ESPN.com).

This sudden turn of events obviously had a drastically negative impact on Penn State University, affecting more than its football program. While the crisis itself went into further details regarding what exactly Sandusky's charges were and who else might have been involved, an important issue that arises is how Penn State officials handled the situation. In an article for NBC Sports, Michael Ventre discusses this matter. From an interview with Scott Carmichael, "who now runs Prodigy Sports LLC, a consulting and search firm based in Freehold, N.J. and who is also an adjunct professor of sports management at Drexel University," he quotes, "From what I've read on the Penn State [situation], it might be unfair to say, but it seemed at least that they were very unprepared and disorganized. It appeared from my perspective they didn't have a plan. The most important things are consistency and honesty" (Ventre). Having a proper plan in place may have altered the outcome of this crisis, potentially lessening the damages that were done to Penn State University and the negative perspective that it gave outsiders of the school.

At the schools that I discussed in the previous chapter, various crises have been faced and dealt with, teaching these schools valuable lessons and preparing them for the future.

## **The University of Louisville**

“The school handled a scandal involving Rick Pitino a few years back,” Josh Nicholas, a graduate student in the University of Louisville’s sport administration program, said. “He was extorted for money and it involved an FBI investigation. U of L supported Rick from the beginning and never wavered. I’m not sure what the right answer is for this because Rick breached a personal conduct clause in his contract, but the University stood by his side. I guess in his defense he did not break the law. This was obviously negative publicity for the University and hurt his reputation to a degree.”

## **Vanderbilt University**

“I think any time there is a crisis, the important thing is to learn from the situation at hand and determine what steps the organization can take in order to prevent the same issue in the future,” Drew Fann, director of baseball operations for Vanderbilt, said.

This past September, Vanderbilt’s football program took a hit when wide receiver Chris Boyd “pleaded guilty to helping cover up an alleged on-campus gang rape” (CNN Staff).

In an attempt to immediately handle the situation, a Vanderbilt official released the statement, “The review concluded that Mr. Boyd’s admitted actions are clearly inconsistent with the high standards of behavior expected of our student-athletes” (CNN Staff).

## **The University of Florida**

“The most recent crisis came in the form of one guy called Aaron Hernandez,” Jimena Panduro said. In an article for *The New York Times*, Greg Bishop, in discussing University of Florida student-athletes who found trouble with the law, writes:

“The unsavory underbelly of the Gators’ dominance was recently highlighted when Aaron Hernandez, a starting tight end on the 2008 national championship team who later played for the New England Patriots, was charged with committing an execution-style murder in Massachusetts.”

According to Panduro,

“Though he no longer was at the school, his name being associated with it was an issue. It took a while to do anything; however, finally a decision to remove his name from everything Florida occurred. The decision came from high in the UAA and was taken with the agreement of the University’s president and executive board as this was not just a decision that affected the athletics department, but the reputation of the school as well, thus proving the depth of that interconnected culture around.”

According to Robyn Jones, the athletics department at the University of Florida has a crisis plan in place for when unexpected events such as the Hernandez case might occur.

“In my time here, we have not had to handle a severe crisis other than ones the media starts with athletes being suspended, etc.,” Jones said. “However, I know we in fact do have a crisis management plan in place because I have heard stories about a few years back when there was a bomb threat and the action that



had to be taken from not only a safety point, but [also] a PR standpoint on how to address and solve the issue.”

### **The University of Michigan**

“I haven’t really dealt with crisis situations but I know that during the Rich Rodriguez era of Michigan football it was very hard to get people to give because he wasn’t a popular hire for the very traditional program,” Jessica Poole said. “Not sure what strategies they employed but I think they went the route of selling the programs and players and tradition, not exactly the coach.”

The University of Michigan did have a scenario to deal with in 1989, when then-basketball coach Bill Frieder was fired for accepting a new job. According to the Associated Press, the incident occurred “two days before his team’s opening game in the National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament, to become the head coach at Arizona State. Frieder was told by Michigan not to bother showing up for the tournament.” While the main issue in this case dealt with timing, it also provides an example of how the administrators at the University of Michigan responded to a crisis by putting their university first. The article continues, explaining that the athletic director for Michigan at the time, Bo Schembechler, told the basketball team’s assistant coach to cover. ““I don’t want someone from Arizona State coaching the Michigan team,” Schembechler said. ‘A Michigan man is going to coach Michigan.’”

When determining how to handle a crisis, it is crucial to have a pre-set plan in place, but many scandals are unexpected. Michael Ventre takes this into great detail in his article, “How Should Schools Handle Crisis Situations?”:

“Well, besides a passion for sports, and membership in the NCAA, they all have had to grapple with bad news. In fact, very bad news, the kind that qualifies as scandal on a national scale. Naturally, since every situation is different, and the individuals involved vary widely on the wisdom scale, not all such predicaments are handled uniformly, and with the needed expertise.

“But Jeff Lloyd is in the business of consistency in such matters. He is a member at Sitrick and Company, one of the preeminent crisis management firms in the country. He said there are crucial steps to be taken in each such case.

““The most important thing – and this is especially true with universities, because we hold them to a higher standard, is for them to realize that you’ve got to be honest, you’ve got to be transparent, and you’ve got to be consistent,” Lloyd said. “The way they handle the crisis is oftentimes more important than the crisis itself.

“If they take the position that, “We’ve got to do all we can to protect the institution,” and start to color their responses that way, it can lead to greater problems down the road.””

Later in the article, Ventre writes about Jeff Fellenzer, “an adjunct professor at USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. [...] Fellenzer laid out five steps he believes are vital for a university in dealing with a scandal.”

The steps are as follows:

““One, stay out in front of the story at all times,” [Fellenzer] said. “Two, make sure you have a strong, consistent message starting from the top. Three, accountability; just own up to your mistakes. Four, take the necessary steps to make sure these things won’t happen again. And five, accentuate the positive steps you’ve taken and your good track record.””

Ventre concludes his article with the following statement from Lloyd:

““With our clients, we focus on various scenarios,’ [Lloyd] said. ‘We say, “Let’s talk about some of the worst things that could happen and how you’re going to handle them.””

‘The response a lot of times is, “Who in the world would think about these kind of situations?” Well, you just can’t imagine.’

## Chapter 5: The Future of Ole Miss Athletics

While the staff focuses on the present well-being of Ole Miss athletics, its ultimate goal is to build toward a brighter and better future, garnering support from fans and inviting them to become a part of future improvements and developments. This is done through a series of strategies and campaigns, public relations techniques that point toward what the future holds for the University of Mississippi and its athletics programs. Additionally, staying on top of the latest innovations and engaging with the fans helps ensure the development of strong community relations.

Schultz, Caskey and Esherick, in *Media Relations in Sport*, explain the possibilities that new technology offers organizations, particularly those in the sports industry.

“Innovation in the ability of a reader to talk back to a writer or commentator will present new challenges to the sport communication professionals but can also turn casual customers into loyal fans. The ability to respond to a proactive article immediately, to engage in an online chat, or to send out an immediate tweet or email in response to a comment or event on TV can have the potential to keep the attention of an audience and build a solid base of repeat customers” (260).

Campbell, assistant athletic director for media and public relations, agrees with this concept, applying it to the ongoing efforts of the Ole Miss Athletics Department to stay current on the latest innovations and allowing them to prepare for the future by doing so.

“From [a media and public relations] standpoint, it’s obviously important that we stay on top of technology, and our department’s certainly a big part of that,” Campbell said. “Making sure that the image that we put out of our athletics department shows that of a progressive department and one that is modern and cutting-edge in college athletics. As far as preparing other departments and preparing other teams, we try to provide as many message points as we can so that if our leadership faces questions, they’re handling them appropriately.”

In addition to expanding and improving its communication abilities, those within Ole Miss athletics are working to further develop their external relations through fundraising and campaigns. By following the public relations techniques of putting the public first, being transparent and honest, the Ole Miss Athletics Department and the Ole Miss Athletics Department are making efforts to connect with publics, raising money for future projects to enhance the brand and image of Ole Miss athletics.

The main program currently underway is the Forward Together campaign, a fundraising effort to help build new athletic facilities and to make improvements and additions to existing ones. While this campaign is, for the most part, promoted by the Ole Miss Athletics Foundation, it is an endeavor that all areas of athletics are endorsing, recruiting the utmost support they can obtain.

“I think we’re promoting that, for football and basketball, that we want the facilities to improve and, in football’s case, enlarge. In basketball’s case, into a facility that is another place that people can gather,” said Ponder, director of external relations. “When people gather, relationships form, and therefore there are more opportunities to be exposed to Ole Miss athletics. So, it’s just another

engagement opportunity, and it elevates [...] the brand and image that Ole Miss, that it really deserves. Everything that we do, we want it to be complementary to, again, the overall feel of Ole Miss.”

Thompson, senior associate athletics director for communications and marketing, agrees that the development of new arenas, expanding and improving the facilities of Ole Miss athletics, casts a bright light on the school’s future.

“I think the easiest example of that is what we’re doing with the new arena,” Thompson said. “That’s kind of a joint process of the school and the athletics department working together to build a parking garage for students and for future growth here, an arena that’s state-of-the-art for future growth here that will be able to bring different entertainment options here. It will be a state-of-the-art place to watch basketball. I think that’s probably the easiest and most top-of-mind thing to talk about, but we’re always just kind of working together to make sure that the university is using athletics, in whatever way possible, to continue to promote the University mission.”

The University’s mission to achieve excellence, both on and off the fields and courts of play, seems to have set a spark in Oxford and across the Rebel Nation. Emory Sports Marketing recently released a study analyzing and discussing the fan base levels among SEC schools. An article, published by Evelyn Vanpelt on November 1, 2013, explains the methods of the study and the reasoning behind its examinations:

“The SEC is known for passionate fans and a tradition of winning (it currently boasts the last seven college football national champions). The Emory

Sports Marketing study ranks which of the fan bases in the conference ‘live & die by their team’s performance on the field.”

Further down the article, Vanpelt continues, explaining:

“The study took into account the entire 2012 season and the first five weeks of the 2013 season. Not surprisingly, LSU ranked first. However, it may be a shock to some to see Ole Miss ranked second on the list.”

There has been a long-standing rivalry between the fans of Ole Miss and LSU, but LSU’s fans have certainly been known for their passionate excitement for their football team, especially when playing in their home stadium, also known as “Death Valley.”

The researchers at Emory, according to Vanpelt,

“[C]oncluded that LSU’s fan base is the most volatile (scoring a 30.8), followed by Ole Miss (29.8) and Georgia (22.6). Given the rabid enthusiasm of anyone wearing purple and gold, it is not surprising to find LSU sitting atop the list.

“But Ole Miss? The same Ole Miss who finished last season with a record of 7-6? What on earth are the Rebels doing in second place?

“Something is happening in Oxford, MS, folks. As most SEC fans are well aware, the Rebels rebounded from a 2-10 season in 2011, all the way to a 7-6 record in 2012 – Coach Hugh Freeze’s inaugural year as a head coach in the SEC.”

Those inside Ole Miss athletics are aware of the progress that Ole Miss has made over the past few years, and they share with fans their excitement for what the future holds. With the approaches that the Ole Miss Athletics Department and the Ole Miss

Athletics Foundation are taking, envisioning a bright outlook for the University and its surrounding community while handling adversity in positive, appropriate manners, keys to helping the Rebels, and any organization, make their way to success. This applies not only to football but to every sport the Rebels play, contagiously moving into the strength and fervor behind their fans. Vanpelt sums this up perfectly, conveying the rapidly spreading flame of progress and the wave of a new era that is emerging for the Ole Miss Rebels:

“As a sports reporter covering Ole Miss, I can tell you what I believe it means: *Something is happening in Oxford, MS.*

“Fans feel the energy and effort every single time Ole Miss steps onto the gridiron. They see the belief the coaches have in each other, their players and their journey. They feel the camaraderie and love the Ole Miss players have for one another. They are supportive after a loss and positive after a win, but, make no mistake, it’s not because things have been a bed of roses for the Rebels so far this year. A tough schedule and a multitude of injuries have seen to that.

“Currently, the team’s record is 5-3, but this follows a murderer’s row portion of the schedule that saw Ole Miss travel on the road for four of its first five contests. The schedule, incidentally, is ranked the toughest in the nation through this point in the season.

“The Rebels have also suffered a tremendous number of injuries to key players – with many out for the year or missing significant playing time. Against LSU (ranked number six in the nation at the time), the Ole Miss defense was down as many as seven starters. At one point, Coach Freeze asked on his staff



members what players were left to play stinger (weaksidelinebacker). He was met with the response of, 'No one, coach. We've got no one left.' Nevertheless, the Rebel players and their fans willed themselves to a 27-24 last-second victory over the Tigers in a game that will not be soon forgotten.

“While I'm sure there will be statisticians out there who complain about the validity of the Emory study or argue that the sample was too small, or too biased, the bottom line is Ole Miss is on the rise with the full support of Rebel Nation – win or lose.

“Rebel fans don't need a fancy study to tell them that.”

## **Conclusion**

As this paper has discussed, developing external relations is a crucial component to the overall strength of an organization, and the athletics component of universities is a critical factor in that. After extensive research and in-depth analysis of how athletics departments approach such external relations, there are several key ingredients that, while as tactics they work well on their own, when combined, become the recipe for a successful and thriving athletics program.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the major subjects that have appeared are public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions, and fundraising. While each of these areas has its own qualities and attributes, they share several factors in common, one of the most important being communication. Having consistent communication with publics is vital to helping institutions improve and expand. For public and media relations, this means communicating information with fans and outer communities, providing them with as many facts and figures as possible. Utilizing resources such as the media, social media and other forms of new technology enhances the ability of staff members to reach out to and interactive with external audiences. By behaving and communicating in such a manner, members of organizations not only build credibility, but they also build fan bases. Having a solid relationship with both the public and the media paves the way for positive publicity and brand protection.

As a focus of marketing departments, a brand can make or break an institution's chance of obtaining supporters, especially financial supporters. By looking into the desires and needs of target audiences, however, the marketers of an athletics department

can turn their attention to strategies that will put their brand in the brightest light.

Establishing a connection between the brand and external audiences leads to people feeling a sense of identity with that particular brand, attaching themselves to it on a personal level.

As special connections are made between individuals and athletics organizations, people tend to develop a sense of loyalty. This is where promotions and fundraising enter the picture. Inviting fans to become, more or less, part of the organization, is an effective approach to attracting financial supporters. Promotions such as special events, player appearances, giveaways, and game day experiences capture the attention of fans, fueling their desire to support that particular athletics program and urging them to demonstrate their loyalty through monetary gifts. Many schools' athletics programs use foundations that focus solely on raising money for athletics. Offering perks such as apparel, access to exclusive events, and recognition is a strategy to garner major donations while consequently fortifying the strength of their athletics programs' fan base.

Just as every fan and every community is different, every athletics department at schools across the country is different. The administrators of each athletics department must take a look at their external audiences, finding what their needs and desires are and how to best market athletics programs. There is no perfect equation for obtaining substantial amounts of funding or a surplus of fans. Furthermore, there is no way to completely prevent crises from happening; however, having a crisis management in place and knowing how to properly approach such situations can help protect the brand of an athletics department and maintain credibility with its supporters. By employing the tactics and strategies that I mentioned previously in this chapter as well as throughout the

dissertation, administrators can begin to discover which approaches suit their athletics departments and cater to their fans. Implementing effective communications tactics such as public and media relations, marketing, social media, promotions, and fundraising, administrators of athletics departments can develop both community and external relations, building winning athletics programs, both on and off the field.

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